

# Long Walk Off a Short Pier

A Sailor carries trash down a ship's brow, en route to dumpsters on the end of the pier. Another Sailor doing the same thing ended up taking an unexpected swim.



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**F**light-deck safety—heard it. Shipboard safety—been there. Home safety—done that. Pier safety—huh? What's that?

With two years in the Navy, I consider myself a fairly smart guy, with plenty of common sense, but I did something really dumb. We were halfway through our deploy-

ment in the Arabian Gulf when the ship pulled into Bahrain for some R&R. I had just one problem: I had duty the first day. “No big deal,” I thought. “I’ll have time to catch up.”

We moored at 1000, with liberty scheduled to commence at 1600. “You have to work off those corrosion gripes on the bird first,” barked the detachment chief, referring to our SH-60B. We kicked into overdrive and got the job done so shipmates could hit the beach when “Liberty call!” rang out over the 1MC at 1600 sharp.

I stood on the flight deck, watching my friends file down the brow and race to the phone exchange on the pier. I had it all figured out: I’ll go below decks, have some chow, and wait for the lines to die down. Then I’ll volunteer to take out the trash and slip in a quick call home, too.

Darkness had fallen when I emerged from below decks and made my way to the hangar bay, where I saw my LPO doing some final paperwork for the day. His jaw dropped when I told him I was going to take the trash to the dumpsters on the end of the pier. I think he knew what I was up to, but he didn’t offer any resistance.

After throwing the plastic trash bag over my shoulder, I made a beeline for the brow. I glanced over my shoulder as I headed to the dumpsters to check on the line at the phone exchange. It had dwindled down to just a few folks. Note where my mind was at this point, and you won’t be too surprised at what happens next.

The dumpsters were lined up on a barge, which was tied to the end of the pier. One was for wood, another for plastic, and several more were for regular trash and garbage. The only source of light was a spotlight mounted on a 50-foot pole about 100 feet from the end of the pier. The shadows cast by the spotlight made the barge seem like it was attached directly to the pier. In reality, though, there was a 3-foot gap between the barge and the pier.

When I stepped from the pier, my foot didn’t touch the barge’s steel deck. Instead, I started falling—for what seemed like an eternity, but it really was only 10 feet—into the black abyss below. I grabbed desperately for something to

stop my fall. Soon, I felt barnacles from the sides of the barge tearing at the flesh on the underside of my arms. The barnacles were cutting like razor blades. “What if poisonous sea snakes and jellyfish are nearby?” I thought. “I’ve got

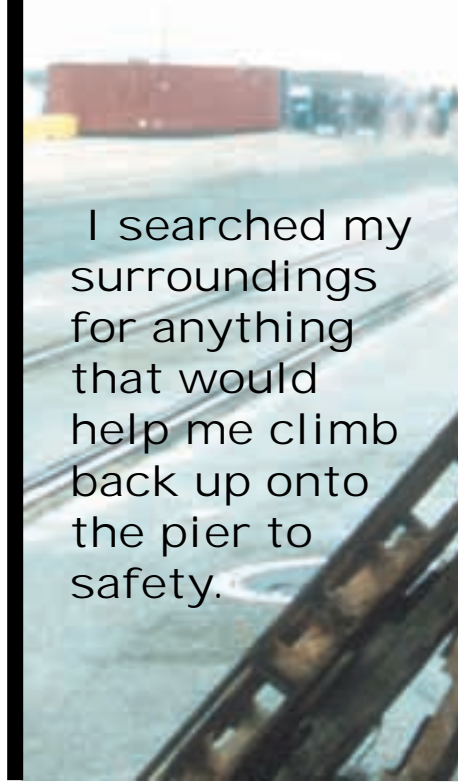
to call for help, but who will hear me? The nearest ship is moored 200 feet down the pier.”

I realized I was about to be crushed between the pier and the ever-pitching barge. I searched my surroundings for anything that would help me climb back up onto the pier to safety. While swimming from one side to the other, I found a way out. Someone had cut off a section of mooring line and left it dangling in the water. I cringed under the excruciating pain of my open wounds in the saltwater as I strained every muscle in my body to scale the pier.

The quarterdeck watch on my ship did a double take when he saw me crossing the brow, dripping wet. As I told my story, he couldn’t help but laugh. His laughter stopped, though, when he saw all the cuts and bruises under both my arms. He sent me to medical, where a corpsman let me know all the shots I would have to take before returning to full duty.

Afterward, I thought about all the lectures shipmates and I had sat through, in which we had heard that mishaps can strike at any time. “Keep your mind focused on the job at hand,” the supervisors had warned. In my case, I let a phone call home interfere with my judgment, and it nearly proved fatal. I couldn’t help wondering how my CO would have told my loved ones that I died while taking out the trash.

*The author was deployed aboard USS Stephen W. Groves (FFG 55) when this incident occurred.*



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